

NEWS RELEASE
MONTANA PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION

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PSC Launches Inquiry into Availability of Broadband Internet

HELENA — The Montana Public Service Commission is launching a survey to identify areas that lack high-speed internet service as the agency prepares to recommend future broadband deployment projects.

The survey is available at the PSC offices in Helena, by mail or online at <http://psc.mt.gov/Survey/Broadband/>. The Commission will study the survey results before meeting with telecommunications providers to recommend broadband deployment projects.

While identifying pockets of unserved customers is the focus of the effort, the Commission also has learned of numerous rural schools with limited internet service. Commissioners said extending broadband to schools and other “community anchor institutions” with little or no access to high-speed internet is a priority.

Linda Marsh, county superintendent of schools for Beaverhead County, said that with the state’s shift toward computer-based standardized exams, reliable high-speed internet is an essential tool in today’s classrooms.

“Every school must have arrangements for all of their students to take the test online, so it’s a big deal,” she said. “I have rural districts that it’s going to affect.”

The PSC’s five Commissioners voted unanimously March 12 to direct staff to identify areas with inadequate internet service. The Commission further instructed staff to begin discussions with CenturyLink, and other carriers if necessary, about extending broadband to unserved areas as part of five-year build-out plans.

Companies such as CenturyLink that receive federal funding to deploy broadband to rural and high-cost areas must file five-year plans with both the Commission and the Federal Communications Commission, or FCC.

The Commission, which certifies the carriers as eligible to receive the federal funding, plans to provide its recommendations for broadband deployment projects as part of the five-year planning process and other forums.

CenturyLink's five-year plan is due July 1, 2014, although other carriers must file their plans by July 1, 2013. Subsequent to filing a five-year plan, carriers must submit annual reports highlighting their progress toward meeting broadband deployment goals.

While the PSC does not regulate broadband internet service in the state, the Commission has previously participated in planning for high-speed internet deployment. As part of a 2008 stipulation and settlement agreement with the Commission, CenturyLink agreed to deploy broadband internet service to 27 rural communities in Montana. The company has since deployed broadband to all but one of those communities, St. Mary. The company is seeking the needed permits to begin the St. Mary project, possibly this year.

Commissioners said they have a responsibility to provide direction for future broadband projects in the state and said the PSC survey is an opportunity for all Montanans to weigh in.

The Commission asks that surveys be returned by May 1. Surveys completed online are automatically submitted to the agency.

The survey is available by following the link at the PSC homepage, www.psc.mt.gov, or at the agency's offices, 1701 Prospect Ave., in Helena. To request a copy of the survey by mail, contact the PSC at 406.444.6199 or email gduncan@mt.gov.

For more information, visit psc.mt.gov or contact PSC Communications/Research Director Justin Post at (406) 444-6171. Follow the PSC at [Twitter.com/@MT_PSC](https://twitter.com/MT_PSC) or visit Facebook.com/MontanaPSC.